

26 February 1973

NOTE FOR THE DIRECTOR

The attached Memorandum attempts to describe the positions and the interests of the various players in the Cambodia game in a way which might be helpful to US officials trying to find openings and pressure points leading to a settlement. The paper was initiated within O/NE before the WASAG Meeting of last Friday which produced a request for a paper on Cambodia dealing more narrowly with the identities of Cambodian insurgent leaders. After consultation with George Carver's staff, it was agreed that the O/NE memorandum should be kept separate and it was revised this weekend after a work session with the best informed analyst of OCI and an officer from the Far East Division, DDP.

In view of Dr. Kissinger's current interest in Cambodia and his apparent receptivity to analysis of the problem, I suggest you may wish to give him this paper in addition to those specifically requested.

[Redacted Signature]

John F. Huizenga

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

26 February 1973

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Cambodia: The Prospects for Compromise

SUMMARY

Of all the countries of Indochina, the prospects for Cambodia in the wake of the Vietnam ceasefire are the most obscure. The Lon Nol government is not in a good negotiating position: the leadership is weak, and political stability is fragile. Lon Nol's health remains precarious, and he has failed to provide any clear direction for government policy. Nor has he been able to unite the leading political figures of the country behind him -- indeed, he has driven many of them away. Though still loyal to Lon Nol, the military has been generally ineffective in coping with the Khmer insurgents. Consequently, the government's control of the countryside has steadily eroded.

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The Khmer insurgents, on the other hand, have steadily grown in strength and have created an increasingly sophisticated military/political organization. In contrast to their earlier role as mere adjuncts to NVA/VC units, Khmer Communist (KC) forces now operate largely on their own with only minimal Vietnamese participation. In effect, the conflict has now taken on more of the nature of a civil war. Moreover, the KC, having tasted of success, may not be readily persuaded to abandon even temporarily their drive for total control of Cambodia.

A settlement in Cambodia is further complicated by the divergent interests of the insurgents' benefactors -- Hanoi and Peking -- and by the competing loyalties of the various groups within the Khmer insurgent movement. Indeed, the real insurgent leadership has not even been clearly identified, though it probably would surface if serious discussions got under way. Thus, while a pause in the fighting may be arranged at some early date, converting it into a meaningful and lasting peace will require not only basic political adjustments in Cambodia, but a degree of understanding among the powers -- principally China, North Vietnam, and the US.

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The paragraphs that follow are an attempt to describe the pressures which now operate in the situation favorable to compromise and settlement as well as to identify the various obstacles -- personalities and divergent interests -- which complicate the search for a settlement.

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I. PRESSURES FOR ACCOMMODATION

1. From Phnom Penh's vantage, there are persuasive arguments for reaching a settlement with the insurgents. The chances of regaining the territory now under insurgent control are negligible. Indeed, the government's military position has been steadily declining. The Cambodian Army (FANK) never really recovered from the crushing defeat it suffered in the Chenla II campaign in November 1971, and since then has shown little inclination to go looking for a fight. FANK's activities are largely restricted to defending the principal towns and trying to keep major routes to the capital open -- the latter with increasing difficulty. US tactical air support continues to be a critical factor, and its complete withdrawal would undoubtedly have a serious impact on FANK's morale and performance.

2. There is little hope of the army getting much better, although the current chief of staff, Sosthene Fernandez, seems to be attempting

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its revitalization. It will be a formidable task. Some effective reorganization and tactical improvements may be possible, but the chances of overcoming the blatant corruption and poor leadership which have plagued the FANK from the start are not good. Lon Nol has been reluctant to provide the forceful backing that serious reforms would require. The precedence of political loyalty and personal friendship over professional competence is an entrenched tradition not likely to be easily cast off.

3. In the meantime, the strength of the Khmer insurgents continues to grow. Although the FANK still enjoys a decided superiority in numbers and firepower (despite its failure to use this to any advantage), the insurgents have established a fairly well-coordinated apparatus throughout most of the country. It is now centralized to the degree that units can be shifted from one area to another with reasonable speed and effectiveness. Insurgent operations have been largely restricted to urban sapper attacks and road interdiction, but their troops are now able to conduct multi-battalion operations with only a minimum of command assistance from the Vietnamese.

4. This significant shift in the balance of indigenous military strength in Cambodia has not gone unnoticed in Phnom Penh. Moreover, the Cambodian leaders have taken on board the likelihood that the US

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military commitment in Cambodia is not open-ended. Even though US tactical air support is still available to FANK on a limited basis, the Vietnam settlement has launched the inexorable final withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam, and thus reinforced the spectre of the ultimate withdrawal of US combat support from Cambodia, as indicated by the terms of the Paris Agreement. This, coupled with US diplomatic urgings to the GKR to begin a dialogue with the insurgents, has undoubtedly left the impression in Phnom Penh that the government's bargaining position can only get worse. Indeed, the idea of coalition government -- once very distasteful to most Cambodian political leaders -- has become palatable to some of them. In Tam, a prominent civilian politician, recently advanced a plan that proposed a coalition government of national unity, and it was received with considerable interest. In Tam was subsequently invited to rejoin the government and assume some responsibilities for exploring contacts with the other side; he has declined, alleging no serious intent on the government's part to make use of his services in this capacity.

5. Hanoi might also see some merit in a compromise settlement now. Under the terms of the Paris Agreement on Vietnam, North Vietnam is supposed to withdraw its forces from Cambodia (and Laos).

While Hanoi will almost certainly cheat and keep some combat units and logistical forces in both countries, it probably wants to keep the cheating at least to levels that would not provoke a US military reaction. In this regard, supporting an active military effort in Cambodia might require greater use of the supply routes in Laos over the next year than Hanoi would wish to risk. Without Hanoi's logistical support, the Cambodian insurgents would not be able to sustain a high level of military activity; thus, if it were willing, Hanoi could bring effective pressure to bear on them. Cooling the war in Cambodia also would be consistent with a shift to a largely "political" war in South Vietnam, a strategy which the North Vietnamese show signs of adopting -- at least for the next several months.

6. An early settlement might seem advantageous from Peking's perspective as well. To begin with, it would encourage the further withdrawal of American forces -- and influence -- from the region. Moreover, a settlement at this juncture could provide more latitude for Chinese influence in Phnom Penh than would be likely in the event of a more decisive victory in the future by communist insurgents largely beholden to Hanoi. While Peking tacitly acknowledges the primacy of Hanoi's interests in Indochina, it seems concerned to retain some direct influence of its own and is probably not disposed to having Cambodia and Laos become mere satellites of North Vietnam.

7. Moscow has struggled to retain some influence in the Cambodian affair, motivated primarily by concern with curbing China's role. Lacking other levers, the USSR recognized the Lon Nol government, but this action left Moscow suspect in the eyes of Hanoi and the Khmer insurgents. It is possible that the Soviets do have some lines out to some individuals or to a faction among the Khmer insurgents. PRC officials have spoken of a "Soviet faction" among the Khmer

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II. OBSTACLES TO FRUITFUL NEGOTIATIONS

8. *The Lon Nol Government.* Despite the pressures for accommodation which may exist, there are major stumbling blocks to any compromise. For example, the GKR has so far made only haphazard efforts to establish a dialogue with KC leaders, primarily because of

Lon Nol's unrealistic appraisal of the government's position, and his intransigent attitude toward granting substantive political concessions to the insurgents. He persists in viewing the insurgency as essentially a Vietnamese show and holds to the belief that most of the insurgents could be attracted back to the government's embrace, once the Vietnamese cadres and troops depart.

9. The very weakness of the government in Phnom Penh is an obstacle to negotiations in that it probably tempts the insurgents to prolong the struggle in hopes of further gains. Lon Nol's greatest weakness as political leader has been his continuing refusal to delegate any real authority to subordinates. This attitude has driven many of the more able political figures away from the government, including Sirik Matak -- once a close colleague and a balancing influence on Lon Nol's rather mystical and arbitrary views.

10. Many of the political problems in Phnom Penh stem from the actions of Lon Non, the president's younger brother, who has become the éminence grise on the Cambodian scene. He played a major role in splitting Lon Nol and Sirik Matak last year and has managed since to keep Matak -- his implacable enemy -- at bay as well as to undercut the powers of other members of the government. Despite gentle

urgings by the US, and his own apparently sincere desire to bring Matak back into the government, Lon Nol has been reluctant to curb his brother's meddling. There are signs that he has now bitten the bullet; he has forcefully instructed little brother to stop his campaign against Matak. Lon Non's enormous ambition will not be easily muffled, though, and persistent presidential firmness will be required.

11. Lon Nol's presence may also be a serious obstacle to any settlement simply because he symbolizes to the Khmer insurgents and Hanoi the US supported nationalist enemy. And to Sihanouk, Lon Nol is the traitor who brought war and destruction to Cambodia and personal ignominy to the Prince. While it thus might seem that Lon Nol's departure would be essential to the achievement of any compromise solution, no one in Phnom Penh seems willing, or able to challenge him. The military has the clout to play kingmaker, and its support remains crucial to any would-be leader. Yet no figure of notable ability or stature has yet emerged from the military's ranks, and the factionalism among the senior officers has diluted the army's political influence. Even should Lon Nol be willing to step aside, then, or should his precarious health cause his death or retirement, there is no obvious successor who might smoothly take command.

12. Among the possible contenders for Lon Nol's job, Sirik Matak seems to have the edge. He has improved his relationship with the military leadership, though he continues to be dismissed by many people as too patrician in background and outlook. He might therefore have trouble rallying support from civilian as well as military elements. If Matak is indeed brought back into the government -- as now seems increasingly likely -- and (as vice-president) is allowed to assume the day-to-day direction of the government he once exercised, he might in time generate greater acceptance, easing the way for his assumption of the top leadership role. Although the KC and their allies are also hostile to Matak, they might, in time, feel greater pressure to come to terms with him if he showed signs of putting together a stronger and more effective regime.

13. Few other candidates in Phnom Penh have much to offer in the way of talent or political connections. In Tam is widely respected for his honesty and initiative and might be less objectionable to the KC, but he is thoroughly disliked by the military hierarchy. Son Ngoc Thanh is politically dead; his power base among the Khmer Krom units in the army has largely dissipated, and his Vietnamese background

and wife have made him suspect in the eyes of the ethnocentric Khmer. Ethnic discrimination also hurts Sosthene Fernandez, who is of Filipino and Portuguese descent; he is also suspected of residual loyalty to Sihanouk.

14. *The Khmer Communists.* The insurgents have their own political problems, which further complicate possible negotiations. In particular, the absence of clearly identified leadership in the insurgent movement complicates efforts to make contact for an exploratory dialogue. Several groups still huddle under the insurgent umbrella -- the Khmer Communists, trained by and presumably responsive to Hanoi; the old Khmer Rouge, opposed to Sihanouk and resentful of North Vietnamese control; and the Khmer Rumdoh, non-communist nationalists at odds with Lon Nol and loyal to Sihanouk. Rivalries and dissension obviously exist, but it is likely that the Khmer Communists have asserted their leadership on the ground in Cambodia and are the predominant force to be dealt with, regardless of other groups on the fringes.

15. Communist propaganda has identified three former Sihanouk ministers -- Khieu Samphan, Hu Nim and Hou Youn -- as leaders of the insurgency in Cambodia, but these men were reportedly executed years ago. Whether any or all of them are alive, or are simply convenient

names chosen for their familiarity to the populace, remains unresolved; and Hanoi has done nothing to clear up the mystery. More publicity is given to Ieng Sary, a minor official of no reputation under Sihanouk, who is now touted as a "special envoy" of the KC and has obviously been earmarked for a major role. Even in the case of Ieng Sary, however, there is doubt as to his connections and sources of support; he spent several years as a refugee in Hanoi and receives regular attention in the North Vietnamese press. He now spends most of his time in Peking and appears to enjoy cordial relations with the Chinese as well.

16. Whatever the insurgent leadership situation, they obviously are not eager to make concessions while their military fortunes continue to improve. Any ceasefire would interrupt the momentum of their growing challenge to what they may see as a weak and stumbling regime. The Khmer Communists may also feel that their political apparatus is not sufficiently mature to take advantage of a ceasefire situation. A continuation of the fighting, then, might appear the best option from their perspective.

17. The KC, however, are not wholly masters of their fate. Their logistical umbilical cord to Hanoi places obvious restraints

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on their actions no matter how independent-minded they may feel. Without such support, their activities eventually would be reduced to low-level guerrilla harassment at best. A crucial question, therefore, is whether Hanoi is willing to put the screws on their protégés to cool down the war.

18. Hanoi may be in something of a dilemma on the issue. On the one hand, it would probably go against the grain to rein in -- or appear to abandon -- an allied insurgent movement which is showing significant growth, unless important political gains were made for their Khmer friends in the process. Such a move could also prejudice Hanoi's longer term relationship with the Khmer insurgents, who would in any event be subject to the pervasive Khmer dislike and distrust of Vietnamese of all political stripes. On the other hand, Hanoi wants nothing to interfere with the complete departure of the US military presence from Indochina. And a continuing requirement for a US military commitment to a beleaguered Phnom Penh regime might do just that. (Indeed, it might be very embarrassing for Hanoi if the insurgents actually toppled the Cambodian house of cards before the US had completed its withdrawal.

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19. But what of Sihanouk? His future role, or lack of one, is a particularly nettlesome problem. Sihanouk is anathema to virtually all political leaders in Phnom Penh, and even Hanoi's commitment to him is tenuous at best. Although Peking has recognized him from the start as the legitimate ruler of Cambodia, Hanoi held back from bestowing such clear recognition until several months ago. While the Prince now claims to have been assured of Hanoi's support, he has also indicated that his role in postwar Cambodia would be that of a figurehead. One senses, though, that Hanoi would be happy to cast the Prince aside. Sihanouk back in Cambodia in any capacity would be an uncertain element, suspect in Hanoi as Peking's man, and clearly capable of kicking over the traces and grabbing for personal power and independence. On the other hand, he still enjoys Peking's open support and remains the only neutralist-nationalist of any standing. Furthermore, there is undoubtedly a residue of loyalty for Sihanouk in Cambodia -- strongest among the peasantry, but perhaps reemerging among those once eager to fight for the new republic, but now sick of the war and nostalgic for the days of peace they knew under the Prince.

20. Just how firm Peking's backing for Sihanouk would remain if Hanoi pressed to desert the Prince is another question. The Chinese

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undoubtedly consider Sihanouk's return as one means of retaining some influence in Phnom Penh. But they might feel it best to defer to Hanoi on the Sihanouk question, if it came up, in the interest of their overall relationship with North Vietnam.

III. THE PROSPECTS FOR COMPROMISE

21. The odds would seem to favor a military cooling off period in Cambodia, however painfully arranged. But the chances for a political arrangement, one that will bow to the minimum demands of each party and yet be a viable structure, seem very dim indeed. If coalition government is to come about, and is to have even a chance of holding together, it will require the cooperation and support of the US, China, North Vietnam, and perhaps even the USSR. It is possible that both Sihanouk and Lon Nol will have to be pushed aside. In that case, a coalition of sorts might be put together around less controversial figures. Even so, without a strong central leader, who could command sufficient indigenous political and military support, the stability and longevity of such a mishmash of interests would be doubtful.